



THE SEER & SLABSIDES

BY DALLAS LORE SHARP

PS
1226
S53

S. H. BURNHAM

CORNELL
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY



BEQUEST
OF
STEWART HENRY BURNHAM
1943

Cornell University Library
PS 1226.S53

The seer of Slabsides /



3 1924 021 995 554

olin



Cornell University
Library

The original of this book is in
the Cornell University Library.

There are no known copyright restrictions in
the United States on the use of the text.

THE SEER OF SLABSIDES



IN THE DOORWAY, SLABSIDES

THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

BY
DALLAS LORE SHARP



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1921

F.

31

COPYRIGHT, 1910, BY THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY COMPANY

COPYRIGHT, 1911 AND 1921, BY DALLAS LORE SHARP

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

A743.2 88

TO
HENRY FORD
LOVER OF BIRDS
FRIEND OF JOHN BURROUGHS

THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

I

THIS title, "The Seer of Slabsides," does not quite fit John Burroughs—the Burroughs I knew. He was a see-er. A lover of nature, he watched the ways of bird and beast; a lover of life, he thought out and wrought out a serene human philosophy that made him teacher and interpreter of the simple and the near at hand rather than of such things as are hidden and far off. He was altogether human; a poet, not a prophet; a great lover of the earth, of his portion of it in New York State, and of everything and everybody dwelling there with him.

4 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

He has added volumes to the area of New York State, and peopled them with immortal folk — little folk, bees, blue-birds, speckled trout, and wild strawberries. He was chiefly concerned with living at Slabsides, or at Woodchuck Lodge, and with writing what he lived. He loved much, observed and interpreted much, speculated a little, but dreamed none at all. “The Lover of Woodchuck Lodge” I might have called him, rather than “The Seer of Slabsides.”

Pietro, the sculptor, has made him resting upon a boulder, his arm across his forehead, as his eyes, shielded from the sun, peer steadily into the future and the far-away. I sat with the old naturalist on this same boulder. It was in October, and

they laid him beside it the following April, on his eighty-fourth birthday. I watched him shield his eyes with his arm, as the sculptor has made him, and gaze far away over the valley to the rolling hills against the sky, where his look lingered, sadly, wearily, for a moment at their vaunting youth and beauty; then coming instantly back to the field below us, he said: "This field is as full of woodchucks as it was eighty years ago. I caught one right here yesterday. How eternally interesting life is! I've studied the woodchuck all my life, and there's no getting to the bottom of him."

He knew, as I knew, that he might never rest against this rock again. He had played upon it as a child. He now sleeps beside it. But so interesting was

6 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

the simplest, the most familiar thing to him, that the long, long twilight, already filling the valley and creeping up toward him, still gave him a chance, as we sat there, to watch the woodchuck slipping from his burrow. Had I been the sculptor, I should have made the old naturalist lying flat on the round of that rock, his white beard a patch of lichen, his eyes peering from under his slouch hat over the top of the boulder at something near at hand—at the woodchuck feeding below in the pasture.

He was the simplest man I ever knew, simpler than a child; for children are often self-conscious and uninterested, whereas Burroughs's interest and curiosity grew with the years, and his directness, his spontaneity, his instant pleasure

and his constant joy in living, his utter naturalness and naïveté amounted to genius. They were his genius—and a stumbling-block to many a reader. *Similia similibus curantur*, or a thief to catch a thief, as we say; and it certainly requires such a degree of simplicity to understand Burroughs as few of us possess.

Not every author improves upon personal acquaintance, but an actual visit with Burroughs seems almost necessary for the right approach to his books. Matter and manner, the virtues and faults of his writings, the very things he did not write about, are all explained in the presence of a man of eighty-three who brings home a woodchuck from the field for dinner, and saves its pelt for a winter coat. And with me at dinner

8 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

that day were other guests, a lover of Whitman from Bolton, England, a distinguished American artist, and others.

The country road, hardly more than a farm lane, shies up close to Woodchuck Lodge as it goes by. Here on the vine-grown porch was the cot of the old naturalist, as close to the road as it could get. Burroughs loved those remote ancestral hills, and all the little folk who inhabited them with him. He was as retiring and shy as a song sparrow — who nests in the bushes, and sings from the fence stake. No man loved his fellow-man more than Burroughs. Here in his cot he could watch the stars come out upon the mountain-tops and see the fires of dawn kindle where the stars had shone, and here, too, he could see every

THE SEER OF SLABSIDES 9

passer-by and, without rising, for he had need to rest, he could reach out a hand of welcome to all who stopped on their journey past.

And everybody stopped. If he had no fresh woodchuck to serve them, he would have one out of a can, for no less in his home than in his heart had he made provision for the coming guest. The stores of the village were far away, but there was no lack of canned woodchuck and hospitality in the Lodge. Few men have had more friends or a wider range of friends than Burroughs. And months later, as I sat looking over the strange medley of them gathered at his funeral, I wondered at them, and asked myself what was it in this simple, childlike man, this lover of the bluebird, of the

10 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

earth on his breast and the sky on his back, that drew these great men and little children about him. He was elemental. He kept his soul. And through the press men crowded up to touch him, and the virtue that went out from him restored to them their souls—their blue-bird with the earth on its breast and the sky, the blue sky, on its back.

II

AND this same restoration I find in his books. John Burroughs began that long line of books by writing an essay for the "Atlantic Monthly," entitled "Expression," — "a somewhat Emersonian Expression," says its author, — which was printed in the "Atlantic" for November, 1860, sixty-one years ago; and in each of those sixty-one years he has not failed to publish one or more essays here where "Expression" led the way.

Sixty-one years are not threescore and ten, being nine years short. Many men have lived and wrought for more than threescore and ten years; but Burroughs's "Atlantic" years are unique. To write

12 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

without a break for sixty-one years, and keep one's eye undimmed, one's natural force unabated, one's soul unfagged and as fresh as dawn, is of itself a great human achievement.

Only a few weeks before his death he sent me a copy of the last book that he should see through the press, and who shall say that "Accepting the Universe" lacks anything of the vigor or finish or freshness found in his earliest books? It is philosophical, theological, indeed, in matter, and rather controversial in style; its theme is like that of "The Light of Day," a theme his pen was ever touching, but nowhere with more largeness and beauty (and inconsistency) than here. For Burroughs, though deeply religious, was a poor theologian. He hated cant, and

feared the very vocabulary of theology as he feared the dark. Life was remarkably single with Burroughs and all of a piece. In a little diary, one of the earliest he has left us, he asks, under date of October 8, 1860 (a month before his first essay appeared in the "Atlantic"):

"Is there no design of analogy in this Universe? Are these striking resemblances that wed remote parts, these family traits that break out all through nature and that show the unity of the creating mind, the work of chance? Are these resemblances and mutual answerings of part to part that human intelligence sees and recognizes only in its most exalted moments—when its vision is clearest—a mere accident?"

That was written in pencil filling a

14 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

whole page of his diary for 1860. On page 220 of "Accepting the Universe," published sixty-one years later, and only a short time before his death, we find this attempted answer :

"So, when we ask, Is there design in Nature? we must make clear what part or phase of Nature we refer to. Can we say that the cosmos as a whole shows any design in our human sense of the word? I think not. The Eternal has no purpose that our language can compass. There can be neither center nor circumference to the Infinite. The distribution of land and water on the globe cannot be the result of design any more than can the shapes of the hills and mountains, or Saturn's rings, or Jupiter's moons. The circular forms and orbits of the universe

must be the result of the laws of matter and force that prevail in celestial mechanics; this is not a final solution of the riddle, but is as near as we can come to it. One question stands on another question, and that on another, and so on, and the bottom question we can never reach and formulate."

It is a beautiful illustration of the continuity, the oneness of this singularly simple life; and it is as good an illustration of how the vigor of his youth steadies into a maturity of strength with age, which in many a late essay — as in "The Long Road," for instance — lifts one and bears one down the unmeasured reaches of geologic time as none of his earlier chapters do.

Many men have written more than

16 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

John Burroughs. His twenty-five volumes are perhaps nothing remarkable for sixty years of steady writing. But it is remarkable to come up to four and eighty with one book just off the press, two more books in manuscript to appear after the light has failed ; for there is still a book of miscellaneous papers, and some studies on Emerson and Thoreau yet to be published.

And I think it a rather remarkable lot of books, beginning with "Wake-Robin," running down through the titles, with "Winter Sunshine," "Birds and Poets," "Locusts and Wild Honey," "Pepacton," "Fresh Fields," "Signs and Seasons," "Riverby," "Far and Near," "Ways of Nature," "Leaf and Tendril," "The Summit of the Years,"

“Time and Change,” “The Breath of Life,” “Under the Apple-Trees,” and “Field and Study,” to “Accepting the Universe,” for these books deal very largely with nature, and by themselves constitute the largest, most significant group of nature-books that have come, perhaps, from any single pen.

These sixteen or seventeen volumes are John Burroughs’s most characteristic and important work. If he has done any desirable thing, made any real contribution to American literature, that contribution will be found among these books. His other books are eminently worth while: there is reverent, honest thinking in his religious essays, a creedless but an absolute and joyous faith; there is simple and exquisite feeling in his poems;

18 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

close analysis and an unmitigatedness wholly Whitmanesque in his interpretation of Whitman ; and no saner, happier criticism anywhere than in his "Literary Values." There are many other excellent critics, however, many poets and religious writers, many other excellent nature-writers, too ; but is there any other who has written so much upon the ways of nature as they parallel and cross the ways of men, upon so great a variety of nature's forms and expressions, and done it with such abiding love, with such truth and charm ?

Yet such a comparison is beyond proof, except in the least of the literary values — mere quantity ; and it may be with literature as with merchandise : the larger the cask the greater the tare.

Charm? Is not charm that which *I* chance to like, or *you* chance to like? Others have written of nature with as much love and truth as has John Burroughs, and each with his own peculiar charm: Audubon, with the spell of wild places and the thrill of fresh wonder; Traherne, with the ecstasy of the religious mystic; Gilbert White, with the sweetness of the evening and the morning; Thoreau, with the heat of noon-day; Jefferies, with just a touch of twilight shadowing all his pages. We want them severally as they are; John Burroughs as he is, neither wandering "lonely as a cloud" in search of poems, nor skulking in the sedges along the banks of the Guaso Nyero looking for lions. We want him at Slabsides, near his

20 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

celery fields, or at Woodchuck Lodge overlooking the high fields that run down from the sky into Montgomery Valley. And whatever the literary quality of our other nature-writers, no one of them has come any nearer than John Burroughs to that difficult ideal—a union of thought and form, no more to be separated than the heart and the bark of a live tree.

Take John Burroughs's work as a whole, and it is beyond dispute the most complete, the most revealing, of all our outdoor literature. His pages lie open like the surface of a pond, sensitive to every wind, or calm as the sky, holding the clouds and the distant blue, and the dragon-fly, stiff-winged, and pinned to the golden knob of a spatter-dock.

All outdoor existence, all outdoor

phenomena, are deeply interesting to him. There is scarcely a form of outdoor life, scarcely a piece of landscape, or natural occurrence characteristic of the Eastern States, which has not been dealt with suggestively in his pages: the rabbit under his porch, the paleozoic pebble along his path, the salt breeze borne inland by the Hudson, the whirl of a snow-storm, the work of the honey bees, the procession of the seasons over Slabsides, even the abundant soil out of which he and his grapes grew and which, "incorruptible and undefiled," he calls divine.

He devotes an entire chapter to the bluebird, a chapter to the fox, one to the apple, another to the wild strawberry. The individual, the particular thing, is always of particular interest to

22 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

him. But so is its habitat, the whole of its environment. He sees the gem, not cut and set in a ring, but rough in the mine, where it glitters on the hand of nature, and glitters all the more that it is worn in the dark. Naturally John Burroughs has written much about the birds; yet he is not an ornithologist. His theme has not been this or that, but nature in its totality, as it is held within the circle of his horizon, as it surrounds, supports, and quickens him.

That nature does support and quicken the spiritual of him, no less than the physical, is the inspiration of his writing and the final comment it requires. Whether the universe was shaped from chaos with man as its end, is a question of real concern to John Burroughs, but

of less concern to him than the problem of shaping himself to the universe, of living as long as he can upon a world so perfectly adapted to life, if only one be physically and spiritually adaptable. To take the earth as one finds it, to plant one's self in it, to plant one's roof-tree in it, to till it, to understand it and the laws which govern it, and the Perfection which created it, and to love it all—this is the heart of John Burroughs's religion, the pith of his philosophy, the conclusion of his books.

But if a perfect place for the fit, how hard a place is this world for the lazy, the ignorant, the stubborn, the weak, the physically and spiritually ill! So hard that a torpid liver is almost a mortal handicap, the stars in their courses

24 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

fighting against the bilious to defeat them, to drive them to take exercise, to a copious drinking of water, to a knowledge of burdock and calomel — to obedience and understanding.

Underlying all of John Burroughs's thought and feeling, framing every one of his books, is a deep sense of the perfection of nature, the sharing of which is physical life, the understanding of which is spiritual life, is knowledge of God himself, in some part of His perfection. "I cannot tell what the simple apparition of the earth and sky mean to me; I think that at rare intervals one sees that they have an immense spiritual meaning, altogether unspeakable, and that they are the great helps, after all." How the world was made — its

geology, its biology — is the great question, for its answer is poetry and religion and life itself. John Burroughs was serenely sure as to how the world was made; the theological speculation as to *why* it was made, he answered by growing small fruits on it, living upon it, writing about it.

Temperamentally John Burroughs was an optimist, as vocationally he was a writer, and avocationally a vine-dresser. He planted and expected to gather — grapes from his grapevines, books from his book-vines, years, satisfactions, sorrows, joys, all that was due him.

The waters know their own and draw

The brook that springs in yonder heights;

So flows the good with equal law

Unto the soul of pure delights.

26 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

And what is it that was due him?
Everything; everything essential; as
everything essential is due the pine-
tree, the prairie, the very planet. Is not
this earth a star? Are not the prairie,
the pine-tree, and man the dust of stars?
each a part of the other? all parts of
one whole—a universe, round, rolling,
without beginning, without end, with-
out flaw, without lack, a universe self-
sustained, perfect?

I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid the eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

John Burroughs came naturally by such
a view of nature and its consequent opti-
mism. It was due partly to his having
been born and brought up on a farm

THE SEER OF SLABSIDES 27

where he had what was due him from the start. Such birth and bringing-up is the natural right of every boy. To know and to do the primitive, the elemental; to go barefoot, to drive the cows, to fish, and to go to school with not too many books, but with "plenty of real things" — these are nominated in every boy's bond.

Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
is the poem of a childhood on the farm,
and the poem of a manhood on the farm,
in spite of the critic who says:

"We have never ceased to wonder that this friend of the birds, this kindly interpreter of nature in all her moods, was born and brought up on a farm; it was in that smiling country watered by the east branch of the Delaware. No

28 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

man, as a rule, knows less about the colors, songs, and habits of birds, and is more indifferent to natural scenery than the man born to the soil, who delves in it and breathes its odors. Contact with it and laborious days seem to deaden his faculties of observation and deprive him of all sympathy with nature.”

During the days when the deadening might have occurred, John Burroughs was teaching school. Then he became a United States bank examiner, and only after that returned to the country—to Riverby and Slabsides, and Woodchuck Lodge,—to live out the rest of his years, years as full of life and books as his vines along the Hudson are full of life and grapes.

Could it be otherwise? If men and

grapes are of the same divine dust, should they not grow according to the same divine laws? Here in the vineyard along the Hudson, John Burroughs planted himself in planting his vines, and every trellis that he set has become his own support and stay. The very clearing of the land for his vineyard was a preparation of himself physically and morally for a more fruitful life.

“Before the snow was off in March,” he says in “Literary Values,” “we set to work under-draining the moist and springy places. My health and spirits improved daily. I seemed to be under-draining my own life and carrying off the stagnant water, as well as that of the land.” And so he was. There are other means of doing it — taking drugs,

30 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

playing golf, walking the streets; but surely the advantages and the poetry are all in favor of the vineyard. And how much fitter a place the vineyard to mellow and ripen life, than a city roof of tarry pebbles and tin!

Though necessarily personal and subjective, John Burroughs's writing is entirely free from self-exploitation and confession. There are pages scattered here and there dealing briefly and frankly with his own natural history, but our thanks are due to John Burroughs that he never made a business of watching himself. Once he was inveigled by a magazine editor into doing "An Egoistical Chapter," wherein we find him as a boy of sixteen reading essays, and capable at that age of feeding for a

whole year upon Dr. Johnson! Then we find him reading Whipple's essays, and the early outdoor papers of Higginson; and later, at twenty-three, settling down with Emerson's essays, and getting one of his own into the "Atlantic Monthly."

How early his own began to come to him!

That first essay in the "Atlantic" was followed by a number of outdoor sketches in the New York "Leader" — written, Burroughs says, "mainly to break the spell of Emerson's influence and get upon ground of my own." He succeeded in both purposes; and a large and exceedingly fertile piece of ground it proved to be, too, this which he got upon! Already the young writer had

32 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

chosen his field and his crop. The out-of-doors has been largely his literary material, as the essay has been largely his literary form, ever since. He has done other things — volumes of literary studies and criticisms; but his theme from first to last has been the Great Book of Nature, a page of which, here and there, he has tried to read to us.

Burroughs's work, in outdoor literature, is a distinct species, with new and well-marked characteristics. He is the nature-writer, to be distinguished from the naturalist in Gilbert White, the mystic in Traherne, the philosopher in Emerson, the preacher, poet, critic in Thoreau, the humorist in Charles Dudley Warner. As we now know the nature-writer we come upon him for the first

time in John Burroughs. ¶ Such credit might have gone to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, had he not been something else before he was a lover of nature — of letters first, then of flowers, carrying his library into the fields; whereas Burroughs brings the fields into the library. The essay whose matter is nature, whose moral is human, whose manner is strictly literary, belongs to John Burroughs. His work is distinguished by this threefold and *even* emphasis. In almost every other of our early outdoor writers either the naturalist or the moralist or the stylist holds the pen.

Early or late, this or that, good outdoor writing must be marked, first, by fidelity to fact; and, secondly, by sincerity of expression. Like qualities mark

34 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

all good literature; but they are themselves the *very* literature of nature. When we take up a nature-book we ask (and it was Burroughs who taught us to ask), "Is the record true? Is the writing honest?"

In these many volumes by John Burroughs there are many observations, and it is more than likely that some of them may be wrong, but it is not possible that any of them could be mixed with observations that Burroughs knows he never made. If Burroughs has written a line of sham natural history, which line is it? In a preface to "Wake-Robin," the author says his readers have sometimes complained that they do not see the things which he sees in the woods; but I doubt if there ever was a reader

who suspected John Burroughs of not seeing the things.

His reply to these complaints is significant, being in no manner a defense, but an exquisite explanation, instead, of the difference between the nature which anybody may see in the woods and the nature that every individual writer, because he is a writer, and an individual, must put into his book: a difference like that between the sweet-water gathered by the bee from the flowers and the drop of acid-stung honey deposited by the bee in the comb. The sweet-water undergoes a chemical change in being brought to the hive, as the wild nature undergoes a literary change—by the addition of the writer's self to the nature, while with the sweet-water it is by the addition of the bee.

36 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

One must be able to walk to an editorial office and back, and all the way walk humbly with his theme, as Burroughs ever does — not entirely forgetful of himself, nor of me (because he has invited me along); but I must be quiet and not disturb the fishing — if we go by way of a trout-stream.

True to the facts, Burroughs is a great deal more than scientific, for he loves the things — the birds, hills, seasons — as well as the truths about them; and true to himself, he is not by any means a simple countryman who has never seen the city, a natural idyl, who lisps in books and essays, because the essays come. He is fully aware of the thing he wants to do, and by his own confession has a due amount of trouble shap-

ing his raw material into finished literary form. He is quite in another class from the authors of "The Complete Angler" and "New England's Rarities Discovered." In Isaak Walton, to quote Leslie Stephen, "*a happy combination of circumstances* has provided us with a true country idyl, fresh and racy from the soil, not consciously constructed by the most skillful artistic hand."

Now the skillful artistic hand is everywhere seen in John Burroughs. What writer in these days could expect happy combinations of circumstances in sufficient numbers for so many volumes?

But being an idyl, when you come to think of it, is not the result of a happy combination of circumstances, but rather

38 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

of stars—of horoscope. You are born an idyl or you are not, and where and when you live has nothing to do with it.

Who would look for a true country idyl to-day in the city of Philadelphia? Yet one came out of there yesterday, and lies here open before me, on the table. It is a slender volume, called “With the Birds, An Affectionate Study,” by Caroline Eliza Hyde. The author is discussing the general subject of nomenclature and animal distribution, and says:

“When the Deluge covered the then known face of the earth, the birds were drowned with every other living thing, except those that Noah, commanded by God, took two by two into the Ark.

“When I reflect deeply and earnestly about the Ark, as every one should,

thoughts crowd my mind with an irresistible force."

[And they crowd my mind, too.]

"Noah and his family had preserved the names of the birds given them by Adam. This is assured, for Noah sent a raven and a dove out to see if the waters had abated, and we have birds of that name now. Nothing was known of our part of the globe, so these birds must have remained in the Holy Land for centuries. We do not hear of them until America was discovered. . . .

"Bats come from Sur. They are very black mouse-like birds, and disagreeable. . . . The bobolink is not mentioned in the Bible, but it is doubtless a primitive bird. The cock that crows too early in the morning . . . can hardly be classed

40 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

with the song-birds. The name of the humming-bird is not mentioned in the Bible, but as there is nothing new under the sun, he is probably a primitive bird."

Burroughs would have agreed that the humming-bird is probably a primitive bird; and also that this is a true idyl, and that he could not write a true idyl if he tried. No one could write like that by trying. And what has any happy combination of circumstances to do with it? No, a book essentially is only a personality in type, and he who would not be frustrated of his hope to write a true idyl must himself be born a true idyl. A fine Miltonic saying!

John Burroughs was not an idyl, but an essayist, with a love for books only second to his love for nature; a watcher in

the woods, a tiller of the soil, a reader, critic, thinker, poet, whose chief business these sixty years has been the interpretation of the out-of-doors.

Upon him as interpreter and observer, certain of his books, "Ways of Nature" and "Leaf and Tendril," are an interesting comment.

Truth does not always make good literature, not when it is stranger than fiction, as it often is; and the writer who sticks to the truth of nature must sometimes do it at the cost of purely literary ends. Have I sacrificed truth to literature? asks Burroughs of his books. Have I seen in nature the things that are there, or the strange man-things, the "winged creeping things which have four feet," and which were an abomina-

tion to the ancient Hebrews, but which the readers of modern nature-writing do greedily devour — are these the things I have seen? And for an answer he sets about a reëxamination of all he has written, from “Wake-Robin” to “Far and Near,” hoping “that the result of the discussion or threshing will not be to make the reader love the animals less, but rather to love the truth more.”

But the result, as embodied in “Ways of Nature” and in “Leaf and Tendril,” is quite the opposite, I fear; for these two volumes are more scientific in tone than any of his other work; and it is the mission, not of science, but of literature, to quicken our love for animals, even for truth. Science only adds to the truth. Yet here, in spite of himself,

Burroughs is more the writer, more the interpreter, than the investigator. He is constantly forgetting his scientific thesis, as, for instance, in the account of his neighbor's errant cow. He succeeds finally, however, in reducing her fairly well to a mechanical piece of beef acting to vegetable stimuli upon a nerve ganglion located somewhere in the region between her horns and her tail.

Now, all this is valuable, and the use made of it is laudable, but would we not rather have the account than the cow, especially from Burroughs? Certainly, because to us it is the *account* that he has come to stand for. And so, if we do not love his scientific animals more, and his scientific findings more, we shall, I think, love all his other books

44 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

more; for we see now that, from the beginning, he has regarded the facts of nature as the solid substance of his books, to be kept as free from fancy and from false report, as his interpretation of them is to be kept free from all exaggeration and cant.

Here, then, are a score of volumes of honest seeing, honest feeling, honest reporting. Such honesty of itself may not make good nature-literature, but without such honesty there can be no good nature-literature.

Nature-literature is not less than the truth, but more; how much more, Burroughs himself suggests to us in a passage about his literary habits.

“For my part,” he says, “I can never interview Nature in the reporter fashion.

I must camp and tramp with her to get any good, and what I get I absorb through my emotions rather than consciously gather through my intellect. . . . An experience must lie in my mind a certain time before I can put it upon paper — say from three to six months. If there is anything in it, it will ripen and mellow by that time. I rarely take any notes, and I have a very poor memory, but rely upon the affinity of my mind for a certain order of truths or observations. What is mine will stick to me, and what is not will drop off. We who write about Nature pick out, I suspect, only the rare moments when we have had glimpses of her, and make much of them. Our lives are dull, our minds crusted over with rubbish like those of

46 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

other people. Then writing about Nature, or about most other subjects, is an expansive process; we are under the law of evolution; we grow the germ into the tree; a little original observation goes a good way." For "when you go to Nature, bring us good science or else good literature, and not a mere inventory of what you have seen. One demonstrates, the other interprets."

Careful as John Burroughs has been with his facts, so careful as often to bring us excellent science, he yet has left us no inventory of the out-of-doors. His work is literature; he is not a demonstrator, but an interpreter, an expositor who is true to the text and true to the whole of the context.

Our pleasure in Burroughs as an

interpreter comes as much from his wholesome good sense, from his balance and sanity, I think, as from the assurance of his sincerity. Free from pose and cant and deception, he is free also from bias and strain. There is something ordinary, normal, reasonable, companionable, about him; an even tenor to all his ways, a deliberateness, naturalness to all his paths, as if they might have been made originally by the cows. So they were.

If Burroughs were to start from my door for a tramp over these small Hingham hills he would cross the trout-brook by my neighbor's stone bridge, and, nibbling a spear of peppermint on the way, would follow the lane and the cow-paths across the pasture. Thoreau

48 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

would pick out the deepest hole in the brook and try to swim across; he would leap the stone walls of the lane, cut a bee-line through the pasture, and drop, for his first look at the landscape, to the bottom of the pit in the seam-face granite quarry. Here he would pull out his notebook and a gnarly wild apple from his pocket, and, intensely, critically, chemically, devouring said apple, make note in the book that the apples of Eden were flat, the apples of Sodom bitter, but this wild, tough, wretched, impossible apple of the Hingham hills united all ambrosial essences in its striking odor of squash-bugs.

Burroughs takes us along with him. Thoreau comes upon us in the woods—jumps out at us from behind some bush,

with a "*Scat!*" Burroughs brings us home in time for tea; Thoreau leaves us tangled up in the briars.

It won't hurt us to be jumped at now and then and told to "*scat!*" It won't hurt us to be digged by the briars. It is good for us, otherwise we might forget that *we* are beneath our clothes. It is good for us and highly diverting,—and highly irritating too.

But Thoreau stands alone. "Walden Pond" is one of America's certain contributions to the world's great books.

For my part, when I take up an outdoor book I am glad if there is quiet in it, and fragrance, and something of the saneness and sweetness of the sky. Not that I always want sweet skies. It is ninety-eight degrees in the shade, and

50 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

three weeks since there fell a drop of rain. I could sing like a robin for a sizzling, crackling thunder-shower — less for the sizzling and crackling than for the shower. Thoreau is a succession of showers — “tempests”; his pages are sheet-lightning, electrifying, purifying, illuminating, but not altogether conducive to peace. “Walden Pond” is something more than a nature book. There is a clear sky to most of Burroughs’s pages, a rural landscape, wide, gently rolling, with cattle standing here and there beneath the trees.

Burroughs’s natural history is entirely natural, his philosophy entirely reasonable, his religion and ethics very much of the kind we wish our minister and our neighbor might possess; and his

manner of writing is so unaffected that we feel we could write in such a manner ourselves. Only we cannot.

Since the time he can be said to have "led" a life, Burroughs has led a literary life; that is to say, nothing has been allowed to interfere with his writing; yet the writing has not been allowed to interfere with a quiet successful business — with his raising of grapes.

He has a study and a vineyard.

Not many men ought to live by the pen alone. A steady diet of inspiration and words is hard on the literary health. The writing should be varied with some good, wholesome work, actual hard work for the hands; not so much work, perhaps, as one would find in an eighteen-acre vineyard; yet John Burroughs's

52 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

eighteen acres certainly proved to be no check—rather, indeed, a stimulus—to his writing. He seems to have gathered a volume out of every acre; and he seems to have put a good acre into every volume. “Fresh Fields” is the name of one of the volumes, “Leaf and Tendril” of another; but the freshness of his fields, the leaves and the tendrils of his vineyard, enter into them all. The grapes of the vineyard are in them also.

Here is a growth of books out of the soil, books that have been trimmed, trained, sprayed, and kept free from rot. Such books may not be altogether according to the public taste; they will keep, however, until the public acquires a better taste. Sound, ripe, fresh, early

and late, a full crop! Has the vineyard anything to do with it?

It is not every farmer who should go to writing, nor every writer who should go to farming; but there is a mighty waste of academic literature, of premature, precocious, lily-handed literature, of chicken-licken literature, because the writers do not know a spade when they see one, would not call it a spade if they knew. Those writers need to do less writing and more farming, more real work with their soft hands in partnership with the elemental forces of nature, or in comradeship with average elemental men—the only species extant of the quality to make writing worth while.

John Burroughs had this labor, this partnership, this comradeship. His writ-

54 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

ing is seasoned and sane. It is ripe, and yet as fresh as green corn with the dew in the silk. You have eaten corn on the cob just from the stalk and steamed in its own husk? Green corn that *is* corn, that has all its milk and sugar and flavor, is corn on the cob, and in the husk—is cob and kernel and husk—not a stripped ear that is cooked into the kitchen air.

Literature is too often stripped of its human husk, and cut from its human cob: the man gone, the writer left; the substance gone, the style left — corn that tastes as much like corn as it tastes like puffed rice — which tastes like nothing at all. There is the sweetness of the husk, the flavor of the cob, the substance of the uncut corn to John Burroughs.

There is no lack of cob and husk to Thoreau — of shell and hull, one should say, for he is more like a green walnut than an ear of green corn. Thoreau is very human, a whole man; but he is almost as much a tree, and a mountain, and a pond, and a spell of weather, and a state of morals. He is the author of "Walden," and nobody else in the world is that; he is a lover of Nature, as ardent a lover as ever eloped with her; he is a lover of men, too, loving them with an intensity that hates them bag and baggage; he is poetical, prophetic, paradoxical, and utterly impossible.

But he knew it. Born in Concord, under the transcendental stars, at a time when Delphic sayings and philosophy, romance and poetry ran wild in the

56 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

gardens where Bouncing-Bet and Wayward Charlie now run wild, Thoreau knew that he was touched, and that all his neighbors were touched, and sought asylum at Walden. But Walden was not distant enough. If John Burroughs in Roxbury, New York, found it necessary to take to the woods in order to escape from Emerson, then Thoreau should have gone to Chicago, or to Xamiltepec.

It is the strain, in Thoreau, that wearies us; his sweating among the stumps and woodchucks, for a bean crop netting him eight dollars, seventy-one and one half cents. But such beans! Beans with minds and souls! Yet, for baking, plain beans are better than these transcendental beans, because your transcendental beans are always baked with-

out pork. A family man, however, cannot contemplate that piddling patch with any patience, even though he have a taste for literature as real as his taste for beans. It is better to watch John Burroughs pruning his grapevines for a crop to net him one thousand, three hundred and twenty-five dollars, and *no* cents, and no half-cents. Here were eighteen acres to be cultivated, whose fruit was to be picked, shipped, and sold in the New York markets at a profit—a profit plainly felt in John Burroughs's books.

Reading what I have just said, as it appeared in the "Atlantic" for November, 1910, Burroughs wrote in the course of a letter to me:

"I feel like scolding you a little for

58 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

disparaging Thoreau for my benefit. Thoreau is nearer the stars than I am. I may be more human, but he is as certainly more divine. His moral and ethical value I think is much greater, and he has a heroic quality that I cannot approach."

Perhaps no truer word will ever be said of these two men than that; and certainly no more generous word was ever spoken by one great writer of another, his nearest rival. I have not, nor would I, disparage Thoreau for Burroughs's benefit. Thoreau dwells apart. He is long past all disparagement. "Walden Pond" and "The Week," if not the most challenging, most original books in American literature, are, with Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and

Emerson's "Essays," among those books.

Thoreau and Burroughs had almost nothing in common except their love of nature, and in that they were farther apart than in anything else, Thoreau searching by night and day in all wild places for his lost horse and hound while Burroughs quietly worshiped, as his rural divinity, the ruminating cow.

The most worthy qualities of good writing are those least noticeable—negative qualities of honesty, directness, sincerity, euphony; noticeable only by their absence. Yet in John Burroughs they amounted to a positive charm. Indeed, are not these same negative qualities the very substance of good style? Such style as is had by a pair of pruning-shears, as is embodied in the exquisite

60 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

lines of a flying swallow — the style that is perfect, purposeful adaptability?

But there is more than efficiency to John Burroughs's style; there are strengths and graces existing in and for themselves. Here is a naturalist who has studied the art of writing. "What little merit my style has," he declares, "is the result of much study and discipline." And whose style, if it be style at all, is not the result of much study and discipline? Flourish, fine-writing, wordiness, obscurity, and cant are exorcised in no other way; and as for the "limpidness, sweetness, freshness," which John Burroughs says should characterize outdoor writing, and which do characterize his writing, how else than by study and discipline shall they be obtained?

Outdoor literature, no less than other types of literature, is both form and matter ; the two are mutually dependent, inseparably one ; but the writer is most faithful to the form when he is most careful of the matter. It makes a vast difference whether his interest is absorbed by what he has to say, or by the possible ways he may say it. If John Burroughs wrote in his shirt-sleeves, as a recent critic says he did, it was because he went about his writing as he went about his vineyarding—for grapes, for thoughts, and not to see how pretty he could make a paragraph look, or into what fantastic form he could train a vine. The vine is lovely in itself—if it bear fruit.

And so is language. Take John Burroughs's manner in any of its moods : its

62 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

store of single, sufficient words, for instance, especially the homely, rugged words and idioms, and the flavor they give, is second to the work they do; or take his use of figures—when he speaks of De Quincey's "discursive, roundabout style, herding his thoughts as a collie dog herds sheep"—and unexpected, vivid, apt as they are, they are even more effective. One is often caught up by the poetry of these essays and borne aloft, but never on a gale of words; the lift and sweep are genuine emotion and thought.

As an essayist—as a nature-writer I ought to say—John Burroughs's literary care is perhaps nowhere so plainly seen as in the simple architecture of his essay plans, in their balance and finish, a qual-

ity that distinguishes him from others of the craft, and that neither gift nor chance could so invariably supply. The common fault of outdoor books is the catalogue—raw data, notes. There are paragraphs of notes in John Burroughs, volumes of them in Thoreau. The average nature-writer sees not too much of nature, but knows all too little of literary values; he sees everything, gets a meaning out of nothing; writes it all down; and gives us what he sees, which is precisely what everybody may see; whereas, we want also what he thinks and feels. Some of our present writers do nothing but feel and divine and fathom—the animal psychologists, whatever they are. The bulk of nature-writing, however, is journalistic, done on the spot, into a

64 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

notebook, as were the journals of Thoreau — fragmentary, yet with Thoreau often exquisite fragments — bits of old stained glass, unleaded, and lacking unity and design.

No such fault can be found with John Burroughs. He went pencilless into the woods, and waited before writing until his return home, until time had elapsed for the multitudinous details of the trip to blur and blend, leaving only the dominant facts and impressions for his pen. Every part of his work is of selected stock, as free from knots and seams and sapwood as a piece of old-growth pine. There is plan, proportion, integrity to his essays — the naturalist living faithfully up to a sensitive literary conscience.

John Burroughs was a good but not a great naturalist, as Audubon and Gray were great naturalists. His claim (and Audubon's in part) upon us is literary. He was a watcher in the woods; he made a few pleasant excursions into the primeval wilderness, leaving his gun at home, and his camera, too, thank Heaven! He broke out no new trail, discovered no new animal, no new thing. But he saw all the old, uncommon things, saw them oftener, watched them longer, through more seasons, than any other writer of our out-of-doors; and though he discovered no new thing, yet he made discoveries, volumes of them—contributions largely to our stock of literature, and to our store of love for the earth, and to our joy in living upon it. He

66 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

turned a little of the universe into literature; translated a portion of the earth into human language; restored to us our garden here eastward in Eden—apple-tree and all.

For a real taste of fruity literature, try John Burroughs's chapter on "The Apple." Try Thoreau's, too,—if you are partial to squash-bugs. There are chapters in John Burroughs, such as "Is it going to Rain?" "A River View," "A Snow-Storm," which seem to me as perfect, in their way, as anything that has ever been done—single, simple, beautiful in form, and deeply significant; the storm being a piece of fine description, of whirling snow across a geologic landscape, distant, and as dark as eternity; the whole wintry picture lighted

and warmed at the end by a glowing touch of human life:

“We love the sight of the brown and ruddy earth ; it is the color of life, while a snow-covered plain is the face of death ; yet snow is but the mark of life-giving rain ; it, too, is the friend of man—the tender, sculpturesque, immaculate, warming, fertilizing snow.”

There are many texts in these volumes, many themes ; and in them all there is one real message : that this is a good world to live in ; that these are good men and women to live with ; that life is good, here and now, and altogether worth living.

III

IT was in October that I last saw him — at Woodchuck Lodge. November 22 he wrote:

I neglected to make any apologies for the long letter I wrote you the other day. I promise not to do so again. I am enclosing an old notebook of mine, filled with all sorts of jottings as you will see. I send it for a keepsake.

We are off for California to-morrow. Hope to be there in early December. We leave Chicago on the 29th. My address there will be *La Jolla*, San Diego. Good luck to you and yours.

Always your friend

JOHN BURROUGHS

He kept his promise too too well. This was the last letter I ever had from him.

He dreaded that California journey. San Diego is a long, long way from Woodchuck Lodge when one is nearing eighty-four. Dr. Barrus and two of her nieces made the trip with him, Henry Ford, out of his friendship, meeting the expenses of the winter sojourn. But California had no cure for the winter that had at last fallen upon the old naturalist. Sickness, and longing for home, and other ills befell him. He was in a hospital for many days. But visitors came to see him as usual; he went among the schools speaking; nor was his pen idle — not yet; one of the last things, if not the very last he wrote for publication, being a vigorous protest against free

70 THE SEER OF SLABSIDES

verse, called "The Reds of Literature." But all the while he was thinking of home, and planning for his birthday party at the Lodge back on the ancestral farm.

We celebrated it. He was there. But he did not know. On the third day of April, his eighty-fourth birthday, followed by a few of his friends, mourned by all the nation, he was laid to rest in the hill pasture, beside the boulder on which he had played as a child, and where only a few months before he had taken me to see the glory of hill and sky that had been his life-long theme, and that were to be his sleep forever.

He died on the train that was bringing him back from California, his last de-

sire not quite fulfilled. He was a wholly human man ; and an utterly simple man ; and so true to himself, that his last words, uttered on the speeding train, expressed and completed his whole life with singular beauty : “How far are we from home,” he asked, —and the light failed ; and the train sped on as if there were need of hurry now !

“ Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea,
I rave no more ’gainst Time or Fate
For lo ! my own shall come to me.”

THE END

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE . MASSACHUSETTS
U . S . A

